Camas

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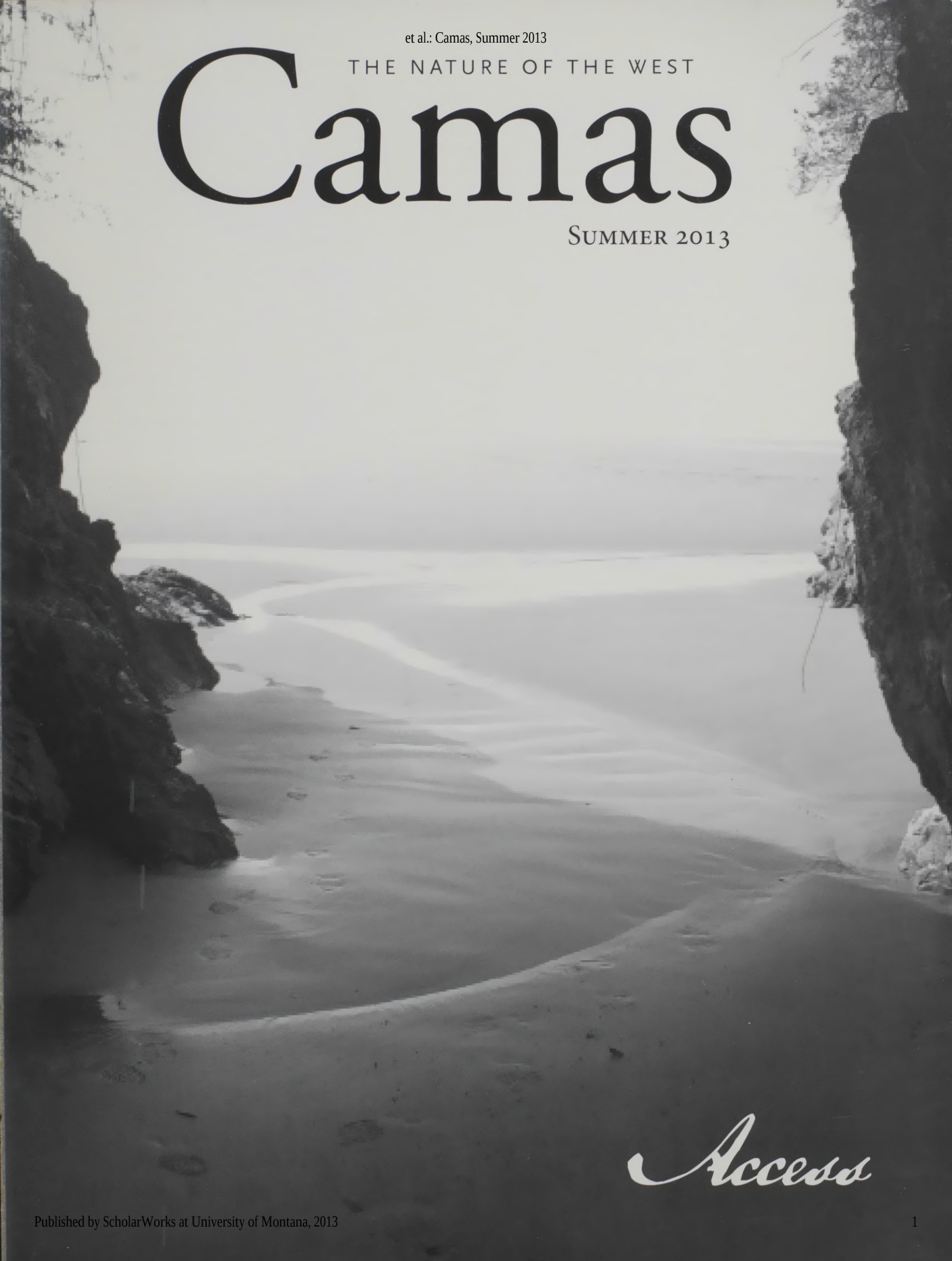
# Camas, Summer 2013

THE NATURE OF THE WEST

# Camas

SUMMER 2013



Access

THE NATURE OF THE WEST

# Camas

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**OUR TITLE** *Camas* takes its name from the plant *Camassia quamash*, which American Indian tribes from the Rocky Mountains to the Cascades honor as a staple of sustenance. Care of the camas prairies passes from generation to generation.

**OUR HISTORY** Founded by Environmental Studies graduate students at The University of Montana in 1992, *Camas* encourages a dialogue on environmental and cultural issues in the West; celebrates the people who work, study, write, and live here; and provides an opportunity for students, emerging writers, and established authors to publish their work alongside each other.

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**Cover: Cassie Nelson**

# Access

## Feature



## Nonfiction



## Fiction



## Poetry

Bethann G. Merkle

# Coming to Rest

*Emily Strauss*

how quickly can you come to rest —
so fast that drops fly off as momentum
is suddenly arrested, the wheel caught
on an old brick hidden in the thistles
and the driver pitches forward while
the mule stumbles and recovers, sad
as always, the world momentarily
stopped as you breathe hard and wait
for the return of placidity;

this fast would be enough to hold one
day silently in abeyance, to remember
all the roads and noons and maps,
dust swirling, night's biting cold
remember the dirt and empty pages
spend one more day catching words
imprisoning them on paper
for anyone to witness, holding the light
just a little while longer.

# Lines on the Land

*Emily Strauss*

roads cut straight white lines
across the distant rising plains
rotten split fence posts
leaning downhill mark off
whole sections
low rock walls collected
from sheep-grazing fields
separate two countries:
Mexican and Basque

powerlines slice the hills
and ford a river whose
rushing water has cut sinuous
channels deep into the layers
of bedrock almost like
roads themselves

a sheer cliff lines the edge
of hard rock faces, fine
veins of quartz waver
unevenly against the darker
flat-topped mesas stepping
to the horizon like so many
wooden blocks dropped from
a child's cloth bag

receding train tracks etch
the foreground on vaulted trestles
resting delicately on their arched
colonnades like a Greek temple —

marked, squared, measured,
delineated, outlined
drawn, silhouetted at dawn
or under the moon
in the imagination of this place

these lines scar the terrain
visible and unseen, the marks
of engineers, dreamers, history,
floods, upheavals
the order of parallel and series,
a predictability of straight.

Mike Canetta

Antoine Vernon

# What We Talk About When We Talk About the Weather

*Matthew Burns*

Things are foreign and strange here
and it is lonely in the desert
so far from green hills of the east.
And, yes, we miss you and trains
and maples and diners that open early
and diners that close right after lunch;
we miss a definition of home we've lost
in the mist of distance and, yes,
we often talk long into the night of rivers
that merge in smooth confluence
beside the railroad that has sat in its ballast
for longer than a century.

The quiet on the line is not boredom
but rather a hollow where silence settles
next to a measure of grief and both lie down
together and hold one another through the nights
that are cold and the days that are hot.

When someone says "back east,"
I always think of the way that means
more than just the right side of the map.

There is origin and foothold and the long overcast
coast that spit its mist and chill and everyone I love
into the hills and valleys of the northeast,
where they stuck and found one another
between rivers and maples and came together,
like rain in the gutter, like frost or grass or leaves
or whatever laid in quiet on the ground in the morning.

I know you have been asleep
for some time; the sun left you hours ago
and these days the night comes on fast.
But in the desert west it is almost dusk,
and there isn't a diner or train around for miles.
There's something inescapably sad in those facts.

It is cold and quiet and when I finally go to bed
I will try to imagine I am one crystal spike of frost
growing in immeasurable length all through the night
toward the far coast far away from here.



Bethann G. Merkle

# WAITING

*Rick Bass*

IN MONTANA, THE FUCKING DO-GOOD ENVIROS had aligned with the ranchers and dryland wheat farmers and were pretty much, for the time being anyway, keeping the drillers out of the deep sour-gas play along the Front — for some reason, Montanans didn't want to awaken to the smell of rotten eggs each morning, nor have it saturate their skin and clothes, preferring instead the ice-scrubbed frosted scent of wind and dirt and rock and sky — but the geologists knew they couldn't be kept out forever. So while they waited for the economic pressure to build — and what were a few more years, when the oil and gas so far below had been nearly half a billion years in the waiting—the geologists worked instead a similar play down in the southern Rockies, in Mexico, where, paradoxically, people didn't seem to care so much about their water.

Richard liked — loved — the thrill of the hunt, and followed the oil wherever it went. He did not care for the company he was sometimes forced to keep, among his fellow geologists, drillers and engineers — too often liars, thieves, charlatans, conmen of the blackest hearts imaginable — but he had been able always before to keep such renegades at arm's length by focusing instead upon only the purity of his labors.

Besieged as they were by loneliness, down in Mexico, the independent oilmen — a disparate and mongrel mix of Texan financial backers and renegade politicians with part-time connections to the Mexican and United States government, Cajun roughnecks and north Mississippi and south Alabama roustabouts and south Texas water-well drillers, self-taught engineers who could drill a well with a broomstick and a rubber band, if they had to — men who could not, would not, be diverted from their goal, regardless of what that goal was — gathered in the evenings to drink, and to talk of work, and nothing else.

There, the den of expatriate rapscallions became not unlike a small community, gossiping and begrudging and yet remaining intensely loyal to one another. They played cards in the evening and went into Rio Hondo, drinking and whoring and commandeering entire restaurants. They flew their little planes through the night sky and across and around the mountains while drunk, flying wherever and whenever they wanted, as if the little buzzing aircraft were nothing more than toy rides at an amusement park.

They flew with spotlights and shone them down onto the desert floor, and into the oak and pinyon forests of the mountains, where the beams, bright as comets, sought the reflecting red eyes of foxes, coyotes, deer and little wolves, jackrabbits and javelinas, which the oilmen pursued for sport. Sometimes they poked rifles and shotguns out through the popped-open vented windows, angling to get a shot.

Owls flew beneath them, ghostly in the glare of the spotlights, and the worst of the reprobates fired at the gliding owls below, as if the owls were not hunters like themselves but were trying to act as some kind of shield, trying to provide a net or layer of intervening grace to protect the denizens of the desert floor.

They staged mock dogfights too, games of chicken in which their little planes would buzz one another, flying straight-on toward each other before always flaring away at the last second — always, the rule was for each fighter to peel to the right. Sometimes, after they had fired into a herd of mule deer, securing what they called "camp meat," they would land their planes on the desert, landing whenever and wherever they wanted — a gravel road, or even the floor of the desert itself — and with the rich scent of freshly chopped prickly pear sweet in the air from where the propeller had whacked out a swath upon landing, and the gin-scent of crushed juniper beneath the plane's wheels, the oilmen spilled out onto the chalky, dusty desert and ran whooping after their wounded prey, baying like bloodhounds following the injured animal sometimes by sight, though other times by the crimson trail of blood.

They tripped and stumbled in gopher holes and ran over the backs of buzzing rattlesnakes; and often, the wounded bucks got away, leaving the oilmen to come straggling, lost and breath-heaving, back toward the plane. Often they could not find it again in the darkness and were forced to spend the night in the desert, bivouacked beneath a scraggly mesquite tree, no longer omnipotent, but as meek and lost as coyote pups, until

the harsh flat light of desert morning revealed to them the next day the distant glint of their carriage, and they could stagger back to it, holding their heads with both hands to minimize the hangover jar of each step.

IT SEEMED TO HIM THAT THEIR UNENDING HUNGER WAS **A SOURCE OF LIBERATION** RATHER THAN A FORM OF CAPTIVITY.

Other times they found their quarry, sometimes stone-dead though occasionally still living, in which case the rougher of the oilmen could be counted upon to leap upon the dying animal with pocketknives or stones, putting the animal out of its misery, as they referred to it, before gutting the animal and then dragging it in a wandering backtrack of trail that roughly approximated the blood-painted markings of the flight; and being the youngest, it was Richard who was called upon to sledge the carcass back toward the plane.

The brow tines of the deer's antlers dug into his palm and wrist and forearm as he pulled it across the sand, and although he found the ritual unpleasant, he chose not to perceive that his own life had any other route; or rather, that this path to his other desires was the most feasible as well as the most mythic: and in his desire for the oil and gas just below, there was not much that he would not have done.

THE MEN SHOVED AND BENT THE TAUT CARCASS of the deer into the back of the plane as best as they could, smearing the fuselage with blood as they lifted the deer through the small door, so that the plane appeared to be anointed with some Biblical waiver of immunity, some endowment of Passover: and crowding themselves back into their little chariots, and ascending back into the sky, the oilmen behaved as if they believed this was the case.

They seemed to Richard — and particularly in those brief moments when they were airborne — to possess a singular power, not just the strength of confidence, but of destiny. It seemed to him that their unending hunger was a source of liberation, rather than a form of captivity; and although he knew better, he followed them, and sometimes even pretended to be one of them. Still falling.

On the return flights to their village, the excesses of the night before would conspire with the bounciness of the little plane and the heat of updrafts to release from some of their membership great expectorations of vomit. The pilots, flying in crude staggered-wing formations like miniature bombers, would call out the various updates of such distress to the passengers on the other planes with glee at the turmoil of their lily-livered compatriots, though chagrin, too, at having to experience the odor themselves; and while providing such reports, they would often key the microphone next to the face of the afflicted as he leaned bent over gagging into whatever makeshift container he had been able to snatch up.

The airwaves amidst all the planes would be amplified with the sound of that retching, the sky would rage with tortured coughs and gags, and the pilots ferrying those passengers who'd fallen ill would push the throttle all the way in and make downwind landings with flaps full up, fairly flying the planes into the ground in an effort to be free of the heated stench as soon as possible; and bailing out of the open doors even as the plane was not yet finished rolling to a stop, they would lie there in the blazing heat gasping at fresh air, looking as if they had fallen straight from the sky.

Always, after such sojourns, they called for one of the many slave-wage paisanos they kept at beckon-call ready for such tasks, and while the oilmen crawled off to their air-conditioned bunkhouses to sleep the rest of the day away, if their drilling schedule would allow it, the paisanos would scrub away the damage, hosing the planes down, polishing and waxing them in the sun, and cleaning and butchering whatever bounty the great hunters had procured.

Later in the afternoon, the servants — *employees*, the oilmen called them — would build a great fire in the open-pit barbeque ring they had dug in the center of the compound, and by nightfall the glowing mesquite coals would be radiating enough heat to bake to a porcelain glaze the sidewalls of the pit, with the deer being rotated slowly on a spit, and being basted with chipotle barbeque sauce by one small child applying that sauce with a broom as another child turned the crank of the spit like

Bethann G. Merkle

an organ grinder, both children's faces blistering from the great heat, and with the succulent odor of fresh meat-juice spattering onto those coals.

The oilmen ate only meat — no fruit or fiber, no vegetables other than fried onions and fried potatoes — and drank salty margaritas, and smoked cigars and cigarettes, all except for Red Watkins, the driller, who would be dead before any of them.

Unlike the others, who tended to careen through life with wild amplitudes of oversteering followed by violent correction, Red Watkins was neat and precise in almost everything he did. On the rig floor, he made sure that his crew kept every tool in its precise place, so that in the event of a blowout or any other calamity, a roughneck could find the proper tools even blindfolded. He insisted that his rigs be tended more carefully than would be animals or even men, resting them every seventh day (though he was not religious), and seeing that the filters and oil and other lubricating fluids were changed on every operating engine far in advance of schedule.

*Making hole*, they called the act of drilling, just as *pulling pipe* meant they were coming out of the hole, for any of a number of different reasons, while *setting pipe* or *running casing* meant only one thing, that the oil or gas had been discovered, and the production pipe would be sent down into the hole and cemented, so that it could stay there forever, and would be perforated then, so that the oil and gas cold flow out of the earth and into the wellbore and up the hole into the waiting world above, ready to be ignited — the oilfield industry composed of but perhaps half a hundred such two-word commands, as if cobbled together in pidgin English, as if even language was an impediment to the yearning to drill farther, drill deeper, make more hole, find more gas.

And even when the roughnecks were not making hole, even when the rig was resting, being hosed and cleaned and cooled down for its Sabbath rest, Red Watkins made sure his workers were neither idle nor relaxed. He busied them with the task of painting the pipe stands and the legs of the derrick in bright silver paint that was the same color as their hardhats, and the driller's doghouse cherry red, and the stucco and adobe temporary office buildings near their encampment snow-white, even if they had just

Bethann G. Merkle

painted these things the week before. It was expensive and wasteful, they went through hundreds of buckets of paint each week, but Red Watkins was determined not to let the men go slack or soft with even a single idle or lazy Sunday afternoon, and so he worked them as if training them for some upcoming physical challenge for which they were not yet adequately prepared.

And once the new-old paint was scraped clean from that one item with its one blemish or imperfection, the roughnecks would begin painting again, working carefully in the stunning heat to apply smooth and cautious strokes, so that there would be no roughness, no striation, only a bright and perfect gloss; and often, Red Watkins would follow along behind the workers, cruising past in his jeep (itself an open-topped unpainted, sandblasted wreck of a thing), sipping a cold beer and squinting through his odd cateye glasses, his silver flat-top haircut still burnished with the flecks of the same red he had been born with and once possessed in such bounty.

He was viewed by the workers with awe and fear, if not quite respect. He did the hiring and firing, and so for the roughnecks and roustabouts who populated the little camp (sleeping in their own separate bunkhouse, kept apart from the geologists and engineers), Red Watkins was more powerful than God. He did not deign to serve as the judge or arbiter of disputes, but instead merely sent both or all disaffected parties packing back to the States, so that beneath his command there was no dissent at the surface, only humming, straightlipped efficiency, even if grievances and complaints writhed below in the men's souls like grubs in wormwood: and together, without exception, they chased the oil.

He loved to cook. From his travels in the South, he had learned a great many recipes, knew the uses and tastes and sources of spices most of the other men had never even heard of, not just cumin and paprika and chili, but saffron and cardamom, Chinese five-spice and mirin; and he knew the effects of their various combinations.

At first glance his concoctions seemed flavorful but simple — high fluffy creamy cat-head biscuits, fried doves and quail, frog legs, venison tenderloin, roasted peppers stuffed with goat cheese, basil, and strangely, peanuts, or olives, or the poached cheeks of fish — huge slabs of steak, embedded with nothing more than cloves of garlic, and dressed with but a crust of olive oil and rosemary, nothing more. But there was a perfection, a ferocity of control, both in their preparation and in their cooking, which brought out their best; and he knew how to arrange a menu, pairing those items — meat, potatoes, and a dessert — in a way that seemed to allow the food to transcend itself. He did not cook all the time, but the men looked forward to it when he did, and all that day, their work would be inspired.

He would puree Bing cherries and ancho chilies in his molasses and brown sugar barbecue sauce, would slice coins of ginger in with the mysterious black beans he kept simmering over a campfire in the desert heat for days on end, the beans taking on a vitreous, iridescent sheen of sweetness. He mixed shredded coconut into his cold buttered flaky pie crusts — almost always, just one or two slight and different elements were thrown into the mix, so that the food continued to masquerade as normal or average, only to explode with richness upon the palate — and, as with everything else in their lives, the men could not get enough.

**MAKING HOLE**, THEY CALLED THE ACT OF DRILLING, JUST AS **PULLING PIPE** MEANT THEY WERE COMING OUT OF THE HOLE . . . THE OILFIELD INDUSTRY COMPOSED OF BUT PERHAPS HALF A HUNDRED SUCH TWO WORD COMMANDS, AS IF COBBLED TOGETHER IN PIDGIN ENGLISH, AS IF EVEN LANGUAGE WAS AN IMPEDIMENT TO THE YEARNING TO **DRILL FARTHER, DRILL DEEPER, MAKE MORE HOLE, FIND MORE GAS.**

Trenton Harper

DESPITE RED WATKINS' NEATNESS THERE WAS WASTE, excess, in their temporary village, and at the well sites scattered beyond, across the desert and along the base of the mountains, and — as the searchers discovered more oil and gas — up into the mountains themselves, scabs of bright new roads ascending the canyons like stitches, with plumes of dust rising from the bone-white roads like the drift of smoke from ascending fires.

Because there was no surface water in the area, save for an occasional thin creek, each drilling well needed its own pit dug beside it, broad and shallow, in which the drilling fluid was kept, which was then circulated down into the hole to help lubricate the drill bit, to assist in better cutting and grinding, and to condition the hole to keep its shape.

The drilling mud — with tiny flecks of the gnawed-out stone floating in suspension — was then circulated back out of the hole. The drill cuttings were strained out of the fluid and examined minutely for any clues of oil or gas, scrutinized for lithology, color, taste, fossil content, all variables which might help the geologists ascertain where exactly they were in the lost landscape of their imagination, two miles below, and poured back into the waiting open pit of brown froth, where a mud man, diligent as a baker, kept close watch on the density and pH and clay content of the vile brown soup, which steamed slightly from its brief contact with the heated innards of the earth's distant interior.

There were no regulations, requirements or restrictions — not in the 1950's, and certainly not in Mexico — regarding the construction and maintenance of the mud pits (which also housed waste oil and diesel fuel from the various workhorse engines required in lifting the great gleaming tonnages of drilling pipe in and out of the hole); and because the dozens and then hundreds of mud pits that were suddenly springing up around the drilling operations represented the only surface water for miles, all manners of wildlife began flocking to the pits, seeking nourishment and respite from the desert's anvil of heat.

Rendered bold by their need, the animals usually waited until night to get into the pits, though when they came (the drilling rigs ran twenty-four hours a day, six days a week), the animals did so wantonly, walking right on past the roughnecks' parked cars and trucks and on out into the shallow mud pits, wading straight in like penitents seeking baptism.

The animals — coyotes and deer, foxes, skunks, bighorn sheep, wild turkeys and bobcats, and an occasional black bear — would drink greedily from

the thick, toxic slurry, which usually had a skim of an inch or two of water floating atop the heavier drilling mud, like cream separating from the milk below — and then they would roll luxuriantly in the chocolate-milkshake-colored mud, splashing and frolicking, while the roughnecks on the drilling platform above looked down in wonder, the mud pit illuminated at night by the brilliant halogen blaze of the rig's Christmas tree lights, wattage so powerful and incandescent that the lights of each rig were visible at any distance upon that planar landscape (a flatness which belied the exciting jumble of topography below, the architecture of the past), and even visible, or so the geologists had been told, from space.

Once the animals had drunk from the toxic pond, it took fifteen or twenty minutes for the sickness to settle in. It afflicted the smaller animals first, so that sometimes they died outright and sank to the bottom of the pit, where they were later fished out by the roughnecks, bloated carcasses slimed elephant gray with the silt at the bottom of the pits — though usually the animals were able, despite their discomfort, to lunge back to the banks of the pit, where, with a caking of mud draped over them now as heavy as concrete, they would collapse a short distance away, lungs heaving and internal organs poisoned. On their brief smoke or lunch breaks, the roughnecks would hurry down from the catwalk and hose the gray and brown drying coat of mud from the coats of those animals still living, and would drag them over into the shade of the drilling rig, so that by the time the sun arose and the stalking heat of the day returned, the sick and dying animals might know some peace and comfort; and just as the mounds of tiny-chipped drill cuttings grew like anthills at the site of each well's location, so too did the pyre of bloated carcasses of the bestiary that had been summoned by the allure of the mud pits, and the promise of water in the desert.

Birds, too, settled into the mud pits, not just migratory waterfowl but bright colorful little songbirds passing back and forth to the tropics — struggling in the mud with oil-soaked wings, as bedraggled now as moths: and in the early years, the geologists would attempt to pull these victims out, dabbing them each in a bucket of valuable fresh water, and spending hours, sometimes, on each wing — the same men who days earlier had been machine-gunning the night sky, and shredding even the beauty of the stars with their violence: though the searchers had other tasks and chores, and the sky was filled with birds, they could in no way begin to keep pace with the steady supply of birds that kept funneling into their pits, so that eventually they gave up and allowed their hearts to harden, accustomed to the waste.

*What do I want*, he would dare to ask himself. He felt off-balance, not knowing what he desired — desiring nothing, really, hunting the oil below almost dispassionately, in cold blood — as anomalous, with that absence of desire, among the other oilmen, as might be a foreigner who did not speak their language.

WHEN THEY CAME, THE ANIMALS DID SO WANTONLY,
WALKING RIGHT ON PAST THE ROUGHNECKS' PARKED CARS
AND TRUCKS AND ON OUT INTO THE SHALLOW MUD PITS,
**WADING STRAIGHT IN LIKE PENITENTS SEEKING BAPTISM.**

He envied the oilmen, with their crude and simple and seemingly bottomless desires, chasing a past that lay miles below. They seemed to him to be hostages of another kind, but intensely alive. They did not seem to be visitors in the world.

The desert, with the blue-and-buff chaparral of the Sierra Occidentals just to the west, the soft foothills reminding him of the contours of a woman's body that might never age. What was it about a desert landscape, he wondered, that produced such needs and appetites, such oversized dreamers and flash-in-the-pan

charlatans?

Was it this way always for any landscape of outer limits, he wondered — landscapes defined by absence, rather than presence? Perhaps such excessive, even childish yearnings arose as if from the soil itself in some inhospitable environments — any strife-filled borderland, near or even just beyond the edge of comfort.

And yet: these pirates with whom he was associating were not all charlatans; and their dreams and desires, even if outlandish and fevered, were not unattainable. They had dreamed a thing, scenting it at first as an animal might imagine cool and distant water, and they had moved towards it like men possessed by a purer truth, abandoning their past lives and stepping recklessly into the future: and what they had found beneath the desert and the foothills was not a dream, but tangible and real as the geologists themselves.

Always, they found just enough of their treasure to be termed successful, to sustain and reward them, and to lure them and encourage them to proceed onward: *Mas alla*, farther on. While they looked north, and waited, pretending to be patient.

*"Waiting" is an excerpt from Rick Bass's upcoming book,* All the Land to Hold Us, *to be published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in August 2013.*

Trenton Harper

# Such Grim Seasons

*Mercedes Lawry*

Take the root vegetables out of the equation.
Introduce a table of contents as if that
would clarify the actions of the agricultural workers
and security men, the bloated thugs
with bad taste, the thin and hungry children.
The border dreams are green and cloudless.
Liars are passing out maps like candy
while a permanent smokescreen sifts through
the valleys. Commerce will suck out
the marrow of leftover bones, leaving no haunted,
no white wisps that might be mistaken for souls.
Take the weathered skin that stretches along
an imaginary line and plant it deep, so
the animals will not dig it up, so that someday
it might become food.

# THE CAKEWALK

*Jenner Harsha*

Trenton Harper

BLUE 52 IS DOWNSTAIRS IN THE KITCHEN. He is in the kitchen eating birthday cake, a bag of onions and an assorted cheese tray — a combination that would wreck havoc on any belly but a Yosemite Valley bear.

I have seen plenty of plastic lined bear scat, Snickers bar scat, digested berries swimming in silver tinfoil. I have seen bear paw punctured hair spray, wondering if I'd catch the critter strutting 'round the valley with a stiff new 'do. I have found a torn backpack scattered in the bramble, cleared of all contents save for the sticker: "Speeding Kills Bears."

No creature quite matches the love affair raven has with tinfoil. When raven spots an unattended sleek roll

of silver shine, he'll have your whole campsite turned disco in mere minutes flat. There are a few notions I have concerning his passion: Perhaps the sheen well reflects his large beak and the brawn of his glacial carved figure. Or the metal scratch sound peaks his curiosity — so foreign here in the peaceful drum of life in a creekside campsite. Or maybe, simply, foil is like play-dough for creatures with eager beaks but without thumbs. Then again, he'd do the same thing with a roll of paper towels: make your campsite look like the communal john with strewn scarps of tissue under every seeming squat.

I once told a backcountry lover that I liked him like ringtail cats like dumpster diving for pizza. He replied, "Well, darlin, I'd call that love, true love." And I won't even get into the ground squirrels that'll rewire your undercarriage, no charge, or nest up in the minivan for you to find two days hence in Disneyland.

An early arriving wet and warm spring — or is it a fleeting winter? — has flushed the Ursus americanus out for the foraging, for camper coolers full of fast food. Like bears ourselves, seasonal workers float in from a slumbering off-season hungry for summer, hungry for the trail, the wall, the tacos from Sal's truck on payday.

The snow melts into a savage spring flow erupting off every rock wall in this granite lined and bowed valley. No tracks but hare and fox, no guzzle of buses; just the spontaneous sharp crack of ice lifting off granite walls, the varied throws 'krruu eeeooh' of the red-winged blackbird. No one around yet to take my picture in government issue mom-jeans — really, you'd think it some kind of despotic contraceptive ploy.

For all the clichéd promises and possibilities, spring does swell the heart, pulsing like the milkfull Merced River. Through the rise of unhurried fog, cycling to work at sunrise, I spot mamas and kiddos abound — bambi, duckling, sapsucker, cub — all learning the modern ways of an ancient life in the valley.

Blue 52, ol' Blue, is a trouble-maker with too many tricks under his expanding belt. Piqued at having missed the celebration and apparently the invitation, he swiftly lets himself into the ranger's club to see about any forgotten party favors at 5 a.m.

The Ranger's Clubhouse is where fifteen — give or take how many summer lovers are hiding under the covers — of America's suited and striving, young, old, starry-eyed seasonal employees sleep in boxcar rooms. Sleep with the omnipresent pitter-patter of mouse paws up the wall. It's where, on the wide redwood porch, we enjoy happy hour during rush hour; where we play and dance under the musky dim and 'smithed chandeliers; our humble harbor beneath the rumbling force of 2,400 feet of Sierran snowmelt in freefall.

The clubhouse was the first quarters ever built for the budding profession of a ranger: flat-hatted naturalist, guardian and guide to America's wild wonders. Built with Stephan Mather's own money, as famously wealthy as he was a nutcase — the National Park Service's first director. We still crowd round the splintering granite fireplace each evening, laughing over the dailies. We still politely escort out the wandering Japanese tour group. Once, Shirley Temple held her birthday party in our simple lodge, though the piano was probably tuned and the cake probably intact.

On the east end of the clubhouse, leading up from a rusty bike rack balanced on fractured pavement, is a side entrance. The door, perched atop a narrow, rickety staircase, is newly affixed with a copper-colored 'Americans with Disabilities Act' approved handle — yielding without an opposable thumb. The sensible resident with impaired mobility might readily breeze in through the pancaked front entryway. The sensible bear might tap this brass ticket and think he's stumbled up the stairway to heaven.

Early March morning, Sturgis-riding maintenance man J.R. stumbles down the west staircase to flip on the coffee pot while wild-eyed falconer Crystal does the same in the east well. Blurry eyes and foggy minds collect to find four industrial fridges wide open, smeared with chocolate frosting, floor littered with onion skins — a cinnamon bear feasting.

There were screams, shouts and a comical command to call the cops. Well, 'ol Blue was surely startled and lingered over his loot. But he knew what to do. With a smug chocolate smile, he sauntered out into the budding spring morning; he sauntered out the accessible doorway.

Joseph Milbrath

Antoine Vernon

# OIL BABY

*Carl Corder*

PORTER WAS ON HIS WAY OUT WHEN THEY found her, halfway sliced in two and her hair burned off. She'd been stopped at a rail crossing. The train cars pitched on the turn and rolled — livestock cars, all of them — and afterwards dead or dying cattle littered the road. The animals' bleating faded out as, one by one, they were silenced by pistol shots. Her Chevrolet had been put in reverse, they found. She had tried to escape, had seen the train cars keeling onto her. Porter set back the telephone, lay on the floor of their living room and tried to understand if it would be better to know the quick end was coming.

He hadn't planned to leave her that very night, or the next — but within the month. And not for another lover. But he felt like an animal that knows to crawl under a house when instinct warns it is about to die. Darcy was younger than Porter by twenty years, and he'd turned foul with her. "A regular dick," she'd say, and there was no worth arguing that. He couldn't explain to her why he often paced the room, nervous — spending more and

more time in the garage, pouring over an oil stained King James at the workbench, as if there was a stopwatch put to his life and he needed to decode some message before it clicked to a hard, definitive stop.

Leaving had been a simple idea that felt new. Currently, he missed the way Darcy's breath smelled. Went to the bedroom and put his nose against her pillow.

Now after the crash there was Cheyenne— Darcy's daughter — and the way her black hair looked like her mother's. "You just needed a daddy in a hurry," Porter would tell Darcy. He was too old to be a daddy — without doubt too old for a single one. Cheyenne was asleep in her room and he knew she would stay asleep if he left.

He drove west thirty miles, then pulled to the shoulder.

"You're a shit," he told himself. "A shit."

He U-turned and drove back. Parked above the tracks, he looked down and saw men lugging the brained cows onto a truck-bed with a forklift. The pile of them looked as if an altar, ready to burn. Crews worked the pocket fires in the soy field. What was left of the train: an enormous, thick-metal snake halved in two, one part still writhing as an engine pulled the righted train cars eastbound. Her truck was already gone. Porter thought: like a fire has rained down, taken Darcy and her car up, left me nothing but burning fields and a six-year-old. In some way, this was his fault.

*Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he owns?* — Porter's father had written this above the mantel in their childhood home in thick black paint, a verse from the book of Job. In it, the Devil asked God if he could destroy Job, and God said yes. Simple as that. "A lesson," Porter's father said, "Things'll go to hell if you let the Lord send them there."

So Porter had tried to work around that warning. Never care too much about anyone — never let them too close — and you won't worry about losing them. Simple. Maybe the crash was God calling his bluff, Darcy caught in the middle. The real lesson was: it's a cruel Lord we have, no matter how you cut it. And now all Porter could think was to light those dead cows on fire and beg the Almighty to stop.

Moths fluttered the light above the garage door and darted at the lamp on Porter's workbench. He swatted mosquitoes on his arms until he saw blood, then stopped and let them take as much as they wanted. He was tired of blood. He was tired of the hot, tar-smelling garage where they'd been for the good part of the last several days. But this was the only place Cheyenne wouldn't holler. The only place other than inside Porter's Jeep.

She stood to reach the passenger-side handle, yanked a few times at the locked door, then stopped as a fly landed on her lip.

"Flash your lip, hon." He motioned with his hand.

She let the fly walk down her chin. Porter stood and lifted her on the workbench. "Where we gonna go?" Anywhere. She just wanted to go. She gave him a look that said *you ought to know*. Same look she'd been giving him since he walked into her dark room and woke the girl up to a motherless world. Cheyenne hadn't said much of anything since, as if he wasn't worth words.

He'd stopped going to work. He did selective cutting for the company in town — felling the oldest trees in a grove, leaving the young and thin to grow yet. But that, along with paying the bills and mowing the lawn, didn't seem to hold much importance any longer. When the foreman called after missed work, Porter told him it was time. For what, exactly, he didn't know. Still. "Cycle of nature," he said. "My turn's up."

Cheyenne wanted to go. *Needed* to go. Any place was as good as another, as long as they went. The fact of the matter: he was terrified to drive. When he looked, he imagined that every window on his Jeep shattered, every piece of metal burned and crumpled into itself. The two Husqvarna chainsaws he kept in the back would rev on and shred the seats into leather strips. As bad as Cheyenne wanted to go was as much as Porter dreaded the sound of engine turning over. He'd begun to fever some after the crash — night

sweats, wet sheets — but riding in the Jeep was more of a fiery hell than anything Porter could imagine, the fever increased to such a degree. Blurred his eyes. But it was a small hell. And as long as Cheyenne was happy — as long as she wasn't dead, or burned up in a train — he could tolerate a small hell.

He buckled her into the passenger seat, and she patted a rhythm on her knees, excited, as if to say, "Thanks." They drove down two-lanes that rose and fell in the dips of creek beds. They deadpanned through farmland until the road reached woods and they drove into them. She didn't talk, but she didn't holler either. A good sign. Hell, the only sign. In the dusk, the trees blocked last light and Cheyenne dozed. The coolness of the woods helping Porter's forehead some. He drove further in — old logging roads, dirt cutbacks — making sure Cheyenne had time enough to go into the kind of sleep she wouldn't wake up from when they got home. By the time they did, Porter's fever returned so bad he fell out the door when he opened it, crawled to the bucket of cool water he kept by his workbench for such occasions and swiped his head.

They both slept in the Jeep that night. When Cheyenne woke in the morning, they spent a long time in the kitchen making breakfast, watching the television and playing board games before she took to the garage, where, before long, Porter had to start the Jeep again.

The thermometer didn't show a fever any longer, but Porter still had one. A burning inside his skin. He walked into the bedroom, stood at Darcy's closet door. Sleeping in the garage was common habit now, and he hadn't been in her room in a week. Opening the door, he looked through Darcy's shoes, found her sneakers missing. Now he knew what she'd been wearing.

Porter had duct-taped a sewing needle to stick out from the driver-side door at thigh-level. Driving the miles at night — as Cheyenne fell asleep — he worked the needle through his jeans, into his leg. Not far enough to puncture muscle, but enough to hurt. And that sharpness somehow helped the fever — it really did.

They drove further now, reached the outer side of the timber fields, kept going across grasslands and thick aisles of corn. He thought about Darcy's sneakers turning black. Rubber melting onto her feet. He worked the needle through his jeans. Challenge God and that's what he gives you. When Cheyenne woke the sun was burning the haze off the land. She raised up and looked out the window, then at Porter.

"Why aren't we home?" she said.

*He thought about Darcy's sneakers turning black. Rubber melting onto her feet.*

He moved in his seat — hearing her talk — and the needle went deeper into his leg. A brown splotch of dried blood stained his pant leg. "We're going to keep on driving, I think. That okay with you?"

"How far?"

"Pretty far. You think you'll be okay for a while?"

"Well, I don't know how long I can do it, but we ain't at that point yet."

These were her Momma's words, by way of memory or habit. If Darcy's patience had been tried—too long at the DMV, too short on the bills, too many drinks—that's how she would respond: *We ain't at a stopping point yet.*

That first month living together, he'd tried to give his paycheck to Darcy. "We don't want none of that," Darcy had said. Always, "We" — and Porter understood then that it would always be like that — Darcy and Cheyenne together, and he by his-self. Maybe that's why he had planned to go: they didn't need him. But even that was too simple. Their first Easter living in the same house, Porter woke to laughing from outside. In the grass, Darcy and Cheyenne wore sundresses, no shoes, facing each other. They brought their hands up in the same way and smacked their palms together, then again. He stood at the screen-door and watched them. An Easter dance, they said, asked him to join. But he left the doorway as soon as they started to again.

He could have been a daddy to Cheyenne before the crash. He didn't know what that looked like, except to act

a bit less grumpy, tell her he loved her. Maybe you play games in the yard on Easter morning. But he hadn't been a father. Didn't try.

A droplet of blood bubbled to the surface after he pricked his finger, careful not to let Cheyenne see. "Maybe, sometimes — maybe it's good to keep driving a while. Even if you get tired. It's like you said, '"We ain't there yet,'" he said.

"Yeah. But I don't got to sleep in the car anymore," she said. "Not even in the garage."

Porter didn't know how far they'd go. He didn't want to stop. They crossed state lines. He kept off the interstates and stuck to the two-lanes. He closed his eyes when they passed green signs with mile markers and town names listed — gave him a rush driving sightless for a few seconds, the rush of becoming deeply lost. He'd logged all over these parts, but the land began to look new to him. Dark, yet foreign. Cheyenne counted telephone poles until she didn't know what the next number would be, then started over at one.

They set camp under a thicket of hanging willows and Porter built a fire as evening came — a purpling in the clouds. The branches hung down over them in a globe — some false barrier. Like plastic-wrap over a busted window. Porter fed Cheyenne crackers and canned meat, fixed them one at a time.

He'd logged all over these parts,
but the land began to look new to him.
Dark, yet foreign.

"I can make 'em myself," she said, took the butter knife and sliced some of the meat. "You make them for you now," she said.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten. He no longer used the needle on the door. The wound on his leg had started to infect — his entire thigh reddening and swelling. Instead he took to grinding his teeth together at night until they popped. Cheyenne handed the meat and knife to Porter, but he put them back down on the ground.

"I think you better eat something," she said.

With every hundred miles they drove, Porter felt further from the blame, though the point of driving had been to embrace it. He would starve himself. He would crack his teeth. Stick needles in his leg. He would do whatever it took, as if to say, *I haven't forgot you Almighty. I still feel like shit. I'll feel like shit forever long as you leave Cheyenne be.* Tomorrow they'd drive back to the crash. Maybe take Cheyenne home first. But he needed to keep that feeling, to know God — if you let him — will bring fire.

He heard their footsteps before he saw them. Four shapes appeared out of the blackness, circled their fire. Three of the faces were distinctly men, but the fourth was a woman. They had a sooty blackness on their faces — a permanent shadow beneath their eyes — and they smelled like too much booze soaked through grimy skin. "Evening," one of the men said.

The woman giggled.

Porter had spent enough time in the boons to know what these people were. His logging company often had him in places of the Midwest that are still wild, still untouched. Not a phone line running to entire towns. The land here — dodged by highways and sprawl — bred a raw, leathery people. A man he worked with had called them bibbers — the way their overalls hung down over bare chests. The thing about bibbers, he'd said, they're self-righteous. More likely to do you wrong because they think you aren't Christian.

"You're awfully far out here for a picnic, don't you think?" one of the bibbers said.

The woman sat and began twirling a finger in Cheyenne's hair, then rubbed her earlobe as if to a dog. The first time Porter had tried to hug Cheyenne, she screamed. He figured, now, she knew well enough not to say a word. The woman searched him for a reaction, trying to provoke one, maybe — and Porter wanted to oblige her. But he could only tighten his lips, drop another

Bethann G. Merkle

stick into the fire. "We're taking a trip. Nice country out here," he said.

"Well I know it's nice. You don't have to tell me that," the bibber said.

"This here's Cheyenne, my daughter. I'm Porter," he said, held out his hand to them, to nothing.

The bibber nudged the other, looked at Cheyenne. He had a narrow, angular jaw, as if part of it had been removed.

"Well Porter, this is a far ways away to be taking your daughter."

"Like I said, we're just getting out."

The bibber ran a hand through thinning black hair, itched his neck.

"There's difference between getting out of town and coming out here," he said. "Like you don't want to be found," he said. "Huh?"

The wind shifted and smoke blew into the face of the bibber who hadn't said much. He was far drunk, eyes narrowed to slits as if he'd been stung by wasps, the skin swollen and bulging around his eyes. He raised on his knees and punched the burning logs — once, twice, then again — the skin of his fingers curling back in black strands.

"Marv, Marv — easy. Look what you did to your fuckin' hand!"

Cheyenne scooted away, but the woman lowered a hand on the small of her back, nudging her closer.

"See, listen. I don't think you're out here having a picnic, mister. Something don't seem right at all. She don't look like your daughter none," he said. "She got that black hair, looks nothing like you," he said.

"See the way she's looking at him?" the other said, nodding towards Cheyenne. "Little whore probably takes it, too."

Porter knew he had options. He could explain to them Darcy was dead, tell them Cheyenne wasn't blood, no, but she was his daughter all the same. Hell, they were drunk enough he could grab Cheyenne and be in the car before any of the bibbers could stand. But none of those options mattered. The angels had found him. No driving in all the world could get him away from this kind of inevitable. Stick needles in his leg all he wanted, no matter.

"Little girl," the woman said. "This man ever touch you dirty-like?"

They used fishing wire around his hands and ankles. The woman collected twigs and — one at a time — put them in his mouth like straws until his mouth was wide open, the skin stretched out, cracking. They tied him in such a way like a roped calf, except his hands and ankles were tied behind his back. Porter wondered if he would hear their belt buckles being undone. Instead they only humped at his leg with their pants on, jumped up and hollered. The man's black hand grabbed his shoulder, and with it came the sour stench of cooked flesh.

The woman took Cheyenne's hand and brought her into the tent. "You hear that? Hear what they're doing to him?" Porter heard her say. "What they're doing is your fault," she said. Then Porter did hear their belt buckles — heard the hiss of fire, smelled the rankness of burning piss. In the dying light of fire going out, the bibbers circled him. He smelled their urine again, felt its warmth running down his back.

They left Porter tied up. Sometime in the night the men passed out around the fire's waning embers, and now — at dawn — smoke rose and met the morning's fog, collecting in a grey blanket over the meadow of chokeweed. He had managed the sticks out of his mouth, working them out one by one with his tongue, which bled. He felt cracks in his lips, tasted copper. The stench of old urine mixed with the smoke from the campfire. One of the bibbers woke, stirred the others. The tent opened and the woman came out.

"Little girl, remember what I told you." the woman said.

Behind her sat an older-looking Cheyenne. She wrapped her shoulders in a down blanket, looked at Porter. She began braiding her hair into a pony-tail, something he hadn't seen her do before. Her eyes were red, but she looked at Porter without crying. She was still looking back at him when the flap blew shut.

"Don't move till you can't see us — pedderass," the man said; he spit on Porter. "Then I don't care what."

They ran the direction the woman had walked. He didn't know where that led. Houses, or caves — maybe? The places people like that might come from; the places they might return to. Cheyenne crawled out of the tent and sat far from Porter. She waited a long time before she took a knife from the car and sat again next to him.

"Only if we go home," she said.

They moved camp, hiking; Porter said it would be as good of a home as any, if that's what she wanted. He removed the rest of their supplies from the back of the Jeep — long underwear, kitchen utensils, sleeping bags — along with the larger of the two Husqvarna chainsaws and a cord of half-inch thick chain. Then they left the Jeep where it was parked, sitting beneath the willow where the tree's rope-like branches had already begun to fall and blanket the car.

A few miles into the brush they stopped and Porter washed the blood out of his mouth in a creek. The water stung — re-opening cuts and softening the scabs forming in his mouth. He swished the water around and spat, watching the blood rope into thinner threads downstream, to where Cheyenne was washing her hair.

"Move upstream. *Cheyenne*."

"More blood on me won't hurt nothing," she said, dangling her braids in the water.

"You don't have any blood on you already. Quit that."

"I've got plenty," she said, continued wetting her hair and wringing it damp again.

He spat the rest of watery blood into the grass, walked to where she was dipping her hair. She screamed *no* and banged on his shoulders as he picked her up by the waist, took her away from the creek. *Why* he grunted as she hit him over and over, again and again. His shoulders were sore yet from being cocked back all night, and her fists hurt more than he thought they would. He set her down in the grass, held her down. "Why you doing that? Getting blood in your hair. Huh?" he said.

"Why aren't we going home? Huh?" she said.

He didn't know why. Didn't know what he planned to do once they were out so far. He only knew that he was tired — had been tired for a long time — and the thing to do was walk. Keep moving. Towards what? Didn't matter, as long as there were places still to walk, further into forest, further away from people and machines and the havoc the two wrought together. Maybe he should have left Cheyenne at home, but that didn't matter now, either.

"You'll let everyone else do whatever they want," she said. "That's why. You just go on and let them. So I want to go home. So I'm making us go home."

He'd let go of her shoulders. She leaned on her hands to stand up, but he stopped her by placing his open palm on the crown of her head, staying her on the ground. Her words ate into him like a saw-blade into the shin.

"Shut up," he said, squeezing her head more. "Shut up, now."

She hadn't cried when Darcy died, and he didn't see her cry when the bibbers had him. He'd begun to believe maybe the act was beyond her, as if so much hurt had closed off that ability — left her in a perpetual shock. Her tears surprised him. Porter lifted his hand from her head.

"She was right," she said.

"Who?"

"That woman. She told me dirty things only happen to dirty girls. And all I want is to go on home, but it's my fault we're out here in the first place. She said that's why they had to tie you up, cause of me. Said I was a temptation."

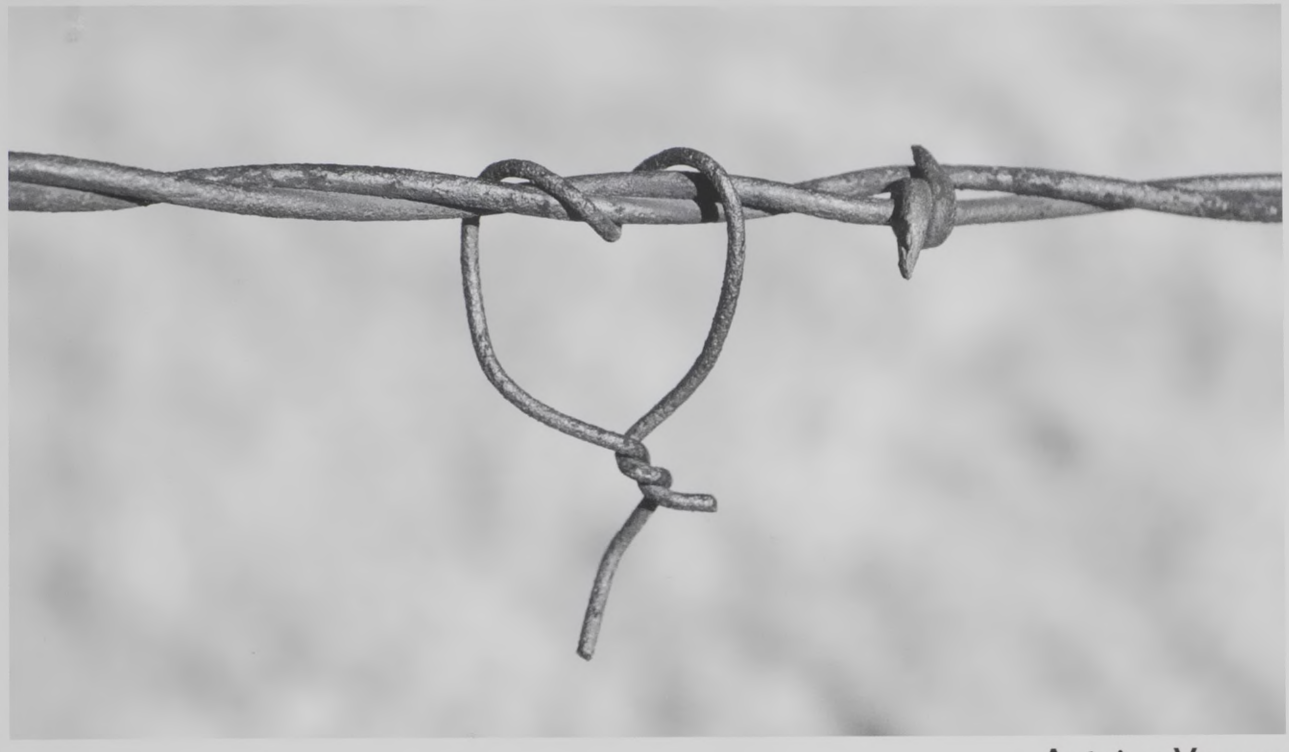
Maybe his father had been wrong. Maybe God sends things to hell no matter how much you protect them. With all the cruelty in the world already, felt like Satan was turned obsolete — after the fact. Not for the first time Porter felt a vast helplessness, like nothing he could say would change what Cheyenne thought, how she would see the world from that moment on. For her to understand that, no, nothing was her fault, she'd just stumbled too soon into a web that, in a few years, would make more sense. Not much more, but some. But then — no, he thought. Fuck that. Nothing ever made any more goddamn sense than it did before. And that was the worst of it, that it never improved.

"She said I deserved it, having pretty black hair. But I don't understand. I'll cut it off — swear. I just want to go home."

"Keep your hair," he said.

Crows circled into the black sky as night fell. Porter's heavy breath fogged in the cold air as he lugged his equipment through thickets of thorn-brush. With each breath he felt like he was waking up further from a dream. The thorn-brush lasted a quarter-mile before it opened into clearer forest, where the bibbers lived.

Their double-wide trailer sagged into its foundations and appeared half-buried — sinking into the ground like a plow in the dustbowl, a buried car on the banks of a river. The once-white trim had turned ocher and the trailer looked as if it was turning into another part of the forest — like any other piece of yellowing flora except for the muddy pink dress hanging from the clothes line and the neon orange light nailed above the front door.



**Antoine Vernon**

A riding lawn-mower was parked outside. A pair of panties were draped on the bushes where Porter crouched and poured oil into the Husqvarna.

A grove like this one would've yielded extensive cutting — old walnuts that'd grown big enough to block sunlight to younger woods. Fat, thirty-inchers. And walnut was a good wood to cut. Tough, yes — he'd had to replace his chains after a single day of cutting walnut — but it was a heavy, dense wood. Used it to make rifle stocks.

When the chainsaw was oiled and gassed, Porter sat down and opened the canned meat Cheyenne'd give him. He watched the house and put pieces of pre-cooked meat in his mouth, tasted the brine saltiness. He'd promised her he would eat when he left her at the hotel, but his stomach churned with the small amount, not yet ready to digest food. The windows glowed blue from a television inside. No sounds came from the woods, only the dull, monotonous hum of the television, playing what Porter guessed were VHS tapes, with no television signal available so far out here. He liked that thought — no signal. No radio waves or telephones, no communication with the outside world. There was only Porter and the bibbers. He waited another hour, then crept closer — foot by foot — to the trailer.

The cord of chain was slung over his shoulder, the chainsaw heavy in his right hand. He wrapped the chain around the door knob, then roped it around the trunk of a nearby tree, pulled the line taught. He pumped the primer of the saw, ripped on the starter-cord once, then again — the motor not turning over. He heard one of the bibbers from inside, "The hell was that?" They jerked on the door to open it. "Hey!" Porter pulled once again on the starter-cord and the only noise he heard after that was the revving of the big Husqvarna — a familiar hum — and the purr of blade spinning.

The bibbers broke a window and Porter saw a hand reaching out just as the first tree slammed down on the trailer longwise. The sound of tree hitting trailer — thick branches gashing roof, window, frame, everything — was like the cracking of bone.

The second tree he lay crosswise over the first.

They drove several miles before he found a familiar road sign, and the sun was all the way up when he and Cheyenne turned onto the nearest highway. His hands smelled like gasoline, and for a moment the smell reminded him of Darcy, reminded him of the oil her car spilled that night, the oil that left him Cheyenne. "I love you," he said, looked at her. But the words were like fresh paint on decayed wood, and he knew the cracks in his lips would take a long time to heal.

# 279

*Clark Chatlain*

they run.

into their own distance.

antelope streaked
with dawn.

painted
into the light.

they run.

they run.
movement without
history.
complicit
with the sun.

they run.
once more the ageless
animal pursuit.
the hour
almost
the same hour.

they run.

across the plains they
run.
across the shining plains.

Trenton Harper

# 316

*Clark Chatlain*

there is no crossing to this land
no crossing
it is not ours
does not exist as we want it to exist
open
variable
belonging to everyone no
there is no coming to this
no finally arriving
we come only to ourselves
fashioned
in our own image
yes to that
what would crossing be
what could it mean
it would be the passage to the origin we
never had
each crossing seeks this origin
each crossing crossing only
to this land bearing
our face
and
not existing
only fading in our own radiance our
cold stellar beauty.

# NURSE LOG

*Mark Rozema*

PICTURE A BOY IN THE WOODS. He is ten years old. He carries a hatchet, but is not using it. Instead, the boy aimlessly shambles around the corpse of a fallen Sitka Spruce. He is a dreamy boy; if you spoke to him he might not hear you. It is not clear what he is doing. His dreaminess seems abnormal. Is it rapt attention? Autism? Idiocy? He is too young to be stoned. He just stares at the log. It seems he is talking to himself.

The rotting log is enormous — its girth greater than the boy's height tripled, and its length hard to discern in the dim light and dense undergrowth of the Olympic rain forest. The log is a world unto itself, intricate in its patterns of decay. Along the top of the log, a row of saplings has taken root: Hemlocks, Cedar, Red Huckleberries, and sprawling vine maples with roots splayed like a network of veins over the top and down the sides of the log. Shelves of fungi, like half-buried plates, nestle in the crotch where a branch as thick as the boy's waist meets the main trunk.

Because the boy is alone, he is free. Because he is free, his imagination is engaged. Too young to know what a fractal is, nonetheless the boy sees and instinctively understands that patterns repeat themselves at smaller and smaller scale: worlds within worlds within worlds.

He sees, for instance, that a patch of moss in a shallow indentation is in fact a forest, and within that forest maybe there is a boy who sees a patch of moss, which is in fact a forest in which a boy sees a patch of moss....

He imagines that a tribe of ant-sized humans inhabits the log. They live, some of them, in the intricate labyrinth of ant-holes bored into the rotten wood. Others live in the ferns and conks, which are, in fact, living buildings. The geography of the log becomes a world of neighborhoods linked by paths. There are three major pockets of growth on the log, where the wood has mostly turned to soil and the plants are thickest. These pockets, he decides, are the Upper Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, and the Lower Kingdom.

A society lives on top of and within the log, a loose affiliation of tribal groups, each with its own customs and commerce, its own systems of governance, its own art and music and mythologies, its own stories of heroism and love and war. He imagines secret wisdom and strange ceremonies under the canopy of ferns. Of course, there must be tests of endurance and skill by which boys become men. And of course among the tribal groups there are alliances and feuds.

There must be an illicit friendship between a girl of the Upper Kingdom and a boy from the Lower; they decide to meet on a secret ledge that requires dangerous climbing for the boy to reach. So the boy makes a desperate climb from one part of the log to another, in order to secretly visit the girl. The boy ascends a network of cracks and furrows on the tree's flank, nearly falling to his death a couple of times, until he arrives at a lush divot in the log, where there is a bed of moss and a pool of water in which he and the girl can swim. Somehow, something heroic and epic must take place in this miniature world of architecturally perfect plants, something involving love and death and children and sacrifice. There must be a story.

The boy understands that there is a kind of economy within the log. There are bargains and transactions. Within the secret chambers of these plant-homes, there are mechanisms and transformations by which the people are sustained. Years before the boy learns words like xylem, phloem, cambium, stomata and chlorophyll, he imagines living buildings that breathe, that pump water, that turn light and soil into food.

Somewhere deep into his fantasy, the boy gets down very close to the log, gets on his belly, in fact, to look eye-to-eye at the startling, intricate, delicate face of decay. Gradually his stories about kingdoms and quests fade away as he notices the real creatures within the log: the banana slug, the crab spider, the industrious beetle. It dawns on him slowly that the log is, in fact, a neighborhood, with its alliances and feuds and ambushes and heroic journeys undertaken because of love.

*He knows only that the log is the coolest thing he has ever seen.*

He is only a boy. He doesn't know that a nurse log holds, pound for pound, more life than any other same-sized patch of ground in the forest. He doesn't know that the white threads he sees woven through the rotten wood, thinner than hair, are tendrils of mycelium spidering out from basal ganglia, and that the spongy mushrooms he sees are the fruit of a huge living net that knits the forest together. He doesn't know how the mycelium simultaneously feeds the new roots of living trees, and is fed, in turn, by the disintegration of the dead one. He doesn't know words like symbiosis. Neither does he know what has been planted in him, or what will grow from this. He knows only that the log is the coolest thing he has ever seen.

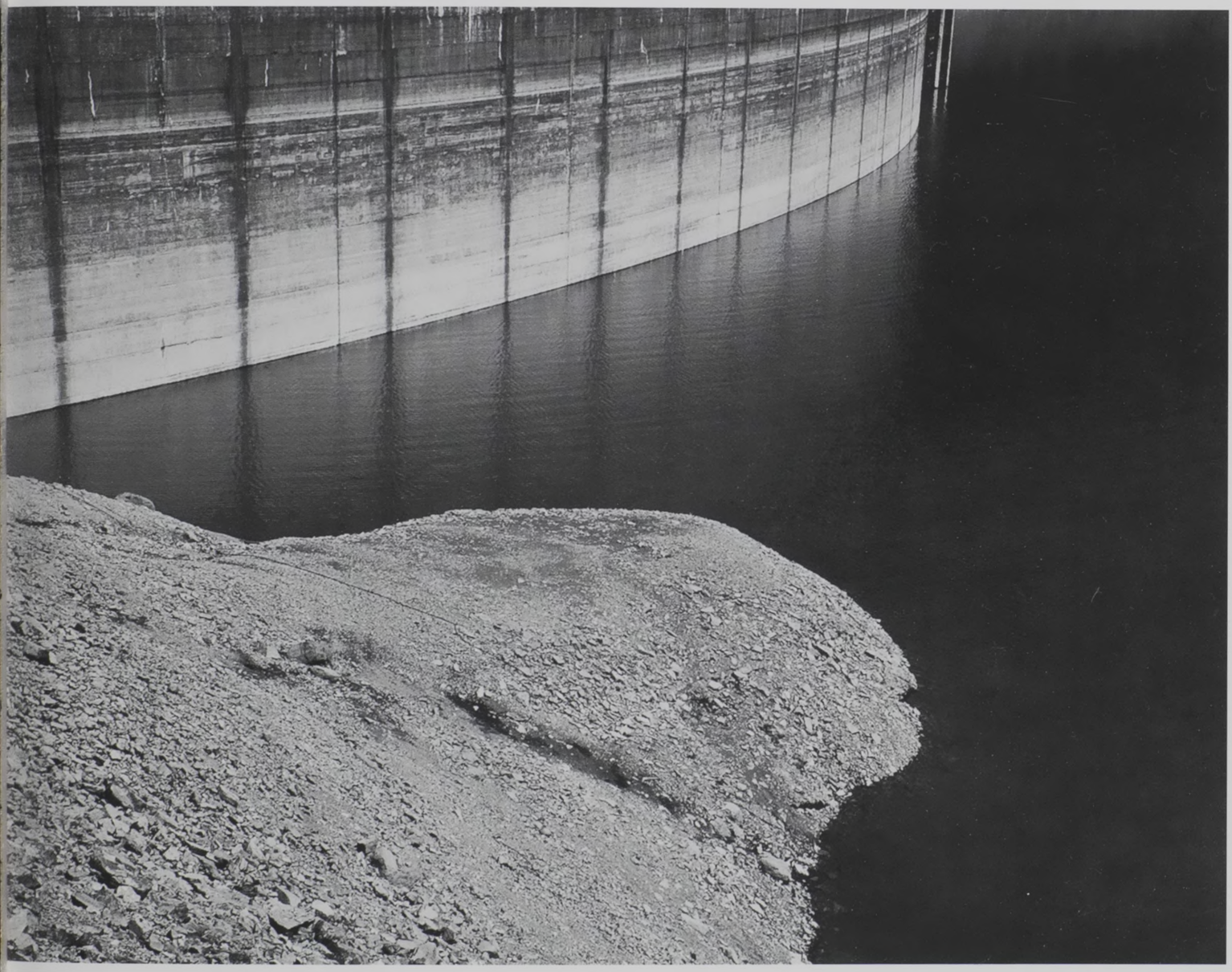
He is pulled out of his reverie by the voice of his father calling him. It is time for dinner. The boy runs back to the campfire where his parents and his older sisters await. His parents ask him what he has been doing. Embarassed, he says he has been chopping wood with his hatchet. That is what a boy should be doing. Chopping wood. "Did you bring any wood back for the fire?" his father asks. The boy mumbles, "No, sorry, I forgot." He can't tell them he has spent an hour looking at a log, making up stories about the tiny people who live on it. He can't tell them that he shrunk, in his mind, to the size of a bug. That's a stupid thing to do. He's too old for that. It shall remain his secret.

# Benchmark

*Jolie B. Kaytes*

*Benchmark: a relatively permanent metal tablet or other mark firmly embedded in a fixed and enduring natural or artificial object, indicating a precisely determined elevation above or below a standard datum, bearing identifying information and used as a reference in surveys.*
*from* The Dictionary of Geological Terms

In the dam lookout tower
mainframes orderly against the wall,
yellow buttons pushed
move gates down, up,
lock river in, out.
We tame wild waters, and assert
a single point of view,
our commitment to control.
Benches mark the banks all year,
we picnic stream side anytime.
On land transfigured
by desires to hold spring run off,
a Colville elder, ardent and sad,
offers careful hope for
renewed flux and flow.
The river can take the benches, he says.
To sit on a bench
firmly fixed on unwilling ground,
or
to ride the same bench downstream
in the first vernal gush?
We can locate the comfort of attachment,
How do we measure the datum of longing
for return?



Lauren Grabelle

Lauren Grabelle

# Scratch Gravel

*Kira Knoles*

Chipped-out and sparkling pieces of granite
grind against the soft skin under our toe bones,
the smell of algae in green and yellow bloom
overtakes the usual old fish-water smell
of the swimming areas on this man-made lake.

Today the water is flat under windless skies
and not even the fat, white carp surface.

Late August, you say, has nothing to offer
at the lake but slow decay, the laughing
picnics of mid-July only remain in an empty
hot-dog package in the bottom of my cooler.

The radiation at this time of year feels like too much
time in the cab of your truck in empty store
parking lots. Skin sweaty and sunscreened pressed
into the rough weave of the upholstery, years of dirt
rubbing, polishing away our age until we are hard
and iridescent in the early evening glow.

We always sit on those sharp-edged beaches
for the obligatory afternoon thunderstorm.

The wind returns whipping up an oceanic surface,
erasing the algae and hiding fish in the swirling lake bed.

I say I can feel my pulse in my cheeks,
running hell-bent up the cliffs to the truck.

Antoine Vernon

# WATER CONTOURS

*Denise Fisher*

It had no name I ever knew. When we told stories, it was just "the lake," as in, remember when the fire department rescued Alan from the lake? Or, remember that story when the Nazi prisoners swam in the lake? They were thinning beets on our Colorado farm. At noon break, they asked our grandfather, in German, to convince the guard to let them swim. He did. Or, remember when I was four and packed a swimsuit and a half-eaten package of graham crackers into an old brown suitcase to run away to the lake? My mother was washing a mountain of freshly cut spinach at the barn sink that day. Without looking up, she said, no, you can't run away to the lake. I went anyway, or tried, lugging my suitcase down the driveway, getting as far as the county road before fear won out over passion.

The pull to the lake was powerful for reasons that come together in pieces. It was where I first saw a family of Canada geese, the mother leading her yellow puffs to the water's edge. It was where, in a rare moment of whimsy, I spent an autumn afternoon after school dancing a steady Indian shuffle around an overturned watering tank, my feet drumming a hollow metal rhythm up into the cottonwoods. It was where I tried to connect with the God I was hearing about on Sundays. God: a wordless world apart from my own, but if I listened hard enough that world would speak to me. I had watched the ripples catch the orange light of a sunset. I had escaped house-chores mid-morning on a summer day and experienced wet lake sounds, birds' flights, cottonwood leaves tapping against each other above me, breeze on my face, as poetry: bird-flying-sun-ripple-air-flash-breeze-ripple....

The lake could also be moody, unpredictable. The same summer I tried to run away, my brothers, Gil and Alan, then eleven and eight, went fishing on a raft. A thunderstorm whipped up, blowing the raft halfway across the quarter mile lake. Then the wind stopped,

leaving them stranded. Gil told us later they screamed for help, but no one came. With lightning threatening, Gil swam for shore. He crawled and backstroked until he felt the silt bottom of the lakeshore on his hands and knees, too tired to drag himself out of the water. A neighbor, who heard them yelling, ran up and pulled him to shore.

That was the day the fire department rescued Alan. I remember the boys coming home afterward, their faces ashen, Gil's wet jeans plastered to his skinny legs, his bare torso covered with goose bumps. I overheard my mother telling them, her voice low and stern, the words measured and even, "Never do that again. The lake is dangerous because it's man-made and has deep holes in the bottom."

*We swam until the last possible moment, until the wind shook the surface of the lake into white-capped waves and the cottonwoods joined the chopping water in a frenzied, swaying dance.*

For some time after, I pictured the bottom of the lake as an oversized peg-board — a muddy bottom punctured by cylindrical holes that plunged to an unimaginable depth. Often, after church, my older sister, brothers and I peeled off stiff suits and dresses in exchange for swim gear, then bounced painfully on the wheel wells in the back of the pickup down the pasture road to the lake. I dog-paddled through the greenish-brown liquid, my chin thrust stubbornly above the surface and thrashed my feet and legs to scare carp lurking nearby. If I swam out too far, I was sure those deep holes would suck me in.

On some Sundays, Dad said, "No, we're not going today. The clouds are rolling in." I hated him for saying it, blaming him for Colorado thunderstorms. And for always being right. By midafternoon the clouds blackened, the temperature dropped, the air rumbled and flashed with electricity, sometimes giving way to hail that would pop off the roof or shatter windowpanes. Once, by some miracle, we went to the lake even though the clouds were moving in. We swam until the last possible moment, until the wind shook the surface of the lake into white-capped waves and the cottonwoods joined the chopping water in a frenzied, swaying dance.

Rarely did my father swim, even though he could. I remember him in his light blue swim trunks, standing in water up to his waist, tossing us balls or splashing us with water. I was always surprised when he explained he didn't like water, that bathtubs held about as much as he could appreciate, and the only boat big enough for him was one that reached from one shore to the next. I wondered if he had always felt that way. I knew he had been on a boat when he was in the Army, and gotten seasick. I now know the ship was on its way to Japan when the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Because of my father's aversion to water, it was surprising when, one summer, he confiscated a little rowboat some trespassers had stashed in the tall weeds on the lakeshore. Playing trickster on the intruders, he re-hid it. Perplexed, my mother asked him, "What are you going to do with a rowboat?"

"Row in it."

And he did, on a moonlit night after climbing out of bed to change the irrigation set. He told us the next morning. I imagined him pulling the boat out of the weeds, slipping it into the dark water and rowing out onto ripples that stretched and jostled the moon.

I, too, wanted to know the lake in the moonlight, to sit shadowed in its secret life. One full moon, I camped the night in the front yard under a brand new tarp tent strung between two trees. When I crawled out of my sleeping bag and pushed back the tent flap, I moved into a magical grey and black world. The luminescent road extended deep into the dark before me, a grey ribbon tapering into the night. It contrasted with the dark weeds at the side of the road that seemed to grow and press toward me. The roar of frogs, toads, crickets, vibrated the air.

A hundred yards down the gravel road, I looked at

Antoine Vernon

our white clapboard farmhouse shining in the moonlight and it seemed miles away. Across the fields and ditches, the dark branches that marked the lake edge looked like strangers. I turned back toward the house and willed my bare feet numb to jabbing gravel until I reached the soft clipped grass of our front yard.

I never saw the summer lake in the moonlight. When I was fifteen, my parents sold our farm and bought a cattle ranch in British Columbia. That summer before we moved I went to the lake nearly every day. After they signed the final sales contract, I drove our Chevy pickup to the pasture gate and found a padlock barring my way. I sat in the cab, my hands paralyzed on the steering wheel. I put the pickup in reverse, and slowly drove back home.

Our ranch in British Columbia turned out to have ponds and springs and lush grass pocketed within stands of fir, spruce and pine. I spent the first year roaming to find a spot that would take the place of the lake. During my wanderings, I saw moose behind our house and bald eagles sitting in the dead snags of old pine trees. A small river, the San Jose, meandered through open meadows and tumbled through forested sections.

In the evenings, I would disappear into my bedroom, sit at my desk and recall the lake, closing my eyes and turning memories over, and turning them finally onto a page I filled with bad poetry that earned me Bs from Mr. Hart in high-school English.

Twenty years later, I have moved back to Colorado and return to see the lake again. I look out my pickup window onto what used to be bare pastures now spotted with huge houses. I turn down a familiar lane. The fields that used to grow my father's alfalfa and silage corn are now a sod farm operated by Turf-Master. I drive slowly past pallets of grass strips, cut, rolled, ready to carpet suburban lawns and parkway medians. An old cottonwood that grew on the ditch is gone.

Two pairs of great blue herons, several pair of mallard ducks and Canada geese, yellow-headed blackbirds, red-winged blackbirds; fish jump, toads roar, and something lower, the sustained bass reverberation of bullfrogs rises from the cattails. The place seems more alive than I remember. Or maybe I am more aware.

On the western shore, more than thirty cottonwoods stand sentinel. Two are uprooted, their tops chain-sawed off. The roots, uplifted on edge, reach into the sky, twice my height. I count the rings of one trunk: more than eighty.

Eighty years ago, Old Man Kern owned this farm. My father told us about a visit George made to the house in the late forties when my parents were newlyweds. He asked to see the house where he had been born and raised. As they walked him through the rooms, he cried.

Loss. Was his like mine? I think back to when my grandparents were alive, how their presence in stories, in this place, gave me a sense of who I was. The ditches that measure distances across fields, the asparagus, the old cottonwood, and the lake have been here forever, or so it seems. They are the landscape of my childhood — the water-shaped contours of my consciousness. I know that my grandparents walked the same ditch banks, picked the same asparagus, and watched the old cottonwoods shattered by lightning back in the thirties. I think of all the people who have died — grandparents, neighbors, people whose funerals I never attended, those I had, who seemed like they could never leave. But they did. And I will.

Birdcalls, drones, hums, roars, fill my ears — and yet it is quiet. I hear the breeze, the distance across the flat fields, the mountains. The lake has gone on with its story. Before I leave, six pelicans circle in formation, the first one flapping, then the rest in sequence. Their white bodies flash in the dim light of the evening, and land on the far side of the lake.

# Contributors

RICK BASS is the author of 30 books of fiction and nonfiction, and has taught the Kittredge Chair in English at the University of Montana, as well as Environmental Humanities. Bill Kittredge has been very good to him.

MATTHEW BURNS teaches writing in Washington State. He holds a PhD in Creative Writing from Binghamton University where he was a managing editor of *Harpur Palate*. His poem "Rhubarb" won the 2010 James Hearst Poetry Prize and his other poems and essays have appeared in *Quiddity*, *North American Review*, *Folk Art*, *Ragazine*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Memoir (and)*, and others.

MIKE CANETTA has a B.S. in Environmental Science from the University of Michigan and is currently working on an M.S. in Environmental Studies at the University of Montana. He spends his summers working as a naturalist in Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park, where he also enjoys hiking, fly fishing, and photographing the vast landscape and its many critters..

Raised in Red Lodge, Montana, CLARK CHATLAIN came to Missoula some time ago and studied philosophy at UM. After graduating he moved around (even out of the state for a bit), but returned to Missoula as soon as he could, and presumably for good. He has previously published poetry in several journals, most recently and upcoming in *Revolution House* and *Natural Bridge*.

CARL CORDER was raised in Clermont, Indiana. He graduated from the University of Montana's MFA Fiction program. He attended the University of Indianapolis. He lives in Missoula, Montana..

DENISE FISHER is a native of northern Colorado with a master's degree in communication development from Colorado State University. In her spare moments, she keeps bees, grows too many heirloom tomatoes, and ferments things. She is currently working on a collection of personal essays.

Originally from New Jersey, LAUREN GRABELLE moved to Montana to heal the wounds that are created by living in the most densely populated state and being so isolated from nature. In Montana she sees (and loves) the land and its people and animals differently each day, recording it as she experiences it with her approach of natural spontaneous capture. Her work falls in the matrix where fine art and documentary meet; where she can tell truths about our relationships to other people, animals, nature, and ourselves. Her work is about empathy.

TRENTON HARPER hails from West Virginia, where an early affinity with the mountains inspired his lifelong interest in wild nature and the traditional living skills of land-based peoples. For the past dozen years, he's bridged social and environmental spheres as a paramedic and wilderness medicine instructor based in Missoula, and a paramedic-ranger in Yellowstone National Park.

JENNER HARSHA is a fourth-generation western rambler. She returns to Grand Teton National Park this summer for her 6th season as a patrol ranger — the headwaters of many lively tales. Now with a degree in Resource Conservation from the University of Montana, she plans to explore novel definitions of wildness & pursue the protection of our remaining vast vistas. In the meantime, she will do her best to keep bear canisters from being bungeed onto the bottom of backpacks.

JOLIE B. KAYTES lives in Moscow, Idaho, and is an associate professor of landscape architecture across the state border at Washington State University. Her teaching, writing, and images integrate disciplinary perspectives and focus on recognizing and celebrating the complexity of landscapes. She is particularly interested in how landscapes are represented, how design can be used as an environmental advocacy tool, the role of landscape architecture in food systems, and the Columbia River Basin.

KIRA KNOLES is a native Montanan from Helena, where she still writes and lives surrounded by mountains. As an undergraduate, she studied creative writing and anthropology at The University of Montana. She now spends much of her non-cubicle-bound time exploring the woods with her boyfriend and dogs.

MERCEDES LAWRY has published poetry in such journals as *Poetry*, *Rhino*, *Nimrod*, *Poetry East*, and *Salamander*, as well as two chapbooks. She's also published fiction, humor, and stories and poems for children. She lives in Seattle.

BETHANN GARRAMON MERKLE grew up leaning into the wind of Montana's Rocky Mountain Front. She is an EVST alum who now uses wordcraft and images to help people tell their stories about ecology, sustainable food, and community issues.

JOSEPH MILBRATH currently resides in Missoula, Montana, where he is pursuing a master's degree in Biogeography. He and his dog, Lily, spend their time wandering western Montana in search of wild places, solitude, pristine waters, and powder.

CASSIE NELSON has roots in the Southern Rockies, thorns and blooms grown in the Sonoran Desert, and a constant bend toward high-latitude skies. She lives in Missoula, Montana, writing and studying in the University of Montana's Environmental Studies graduate program.

MARK ROZEMA's poetry and prose has appeared in various literary journals, including *Puerto del Sol*, *Tar River Poetry*, and *Cutbank*. His first book of creative nonfiction, entitled *Road Trip*, is forthcoming from Red Hen Press. His interests include track and field, rock climbing, and gardening.

EMILY STRAUSS has an M.A. in English, but is self-taught in poetry. Around 100 of her poems appear in dozens of online venues and in anthologies. The natural world is generally her framework; she often focuses on the tension between nature and humanity, using concrete images to illuminate the loss of meaning between them. She is a semi-retired teacher living in California.

ANTOINE VERNON is a geologist by profession and a photography, botany, and zoology enthusiast. Originally from France, he has captured his travels in the West with a fascination for natural-looking landscapes on their way to anthropization.



**Back cover: Trenton Harper**

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